# Fashion Designers

(O*NET 27-1022.00,)

### Significant Points

- In 2004, two-thirds of salaried fashion designers were employed in either New York or California.

- Employers seek designers with a 2- or 4-year degree who are knowledgeable about textiles, fabrics, ornamentation, and fashion trends.

- Job competition is expected to be keen as many designers are attracted to the creativity and glamour associated with the occupation, while relatively few job openings arise.

- More than 1 out of 4 are self-employed.



*Most fashion designers travel several times a year to trade shows in order to view new fabric and other material samples.*

## Nature of the Work

*Fashion designers* help create the billions of clothing articles, shoes, and accessories purchased every year by consumers. Designers study fashion trends, sketch designs of clothing and accessories, select colors and fabrics, and oversee the final production of their designs. Clothing designers create and help produce men's, women's, and children's apparel, including casual wear, suits, sportswear, formalwear, outerwear, maternity, and intimate apparel. *Footwear designers* help create and produce different styles of shoes and boots. *Accessory designers* help create and produce items that add the finishing touches to an outfit, such as handbags, belts, scarves, hats, hosiery, and eyewear. (The work of jewelers and precious stone and metal workers is described elsewhere in the *Handbook*.) Some fashion designers specialize in clothing, footwear, or accessory design, while others create designs in all three fashion categories.

The design process from initial design inception to final production takes between 18 and 24 months. The first step in creating a design is researching fashion trends and making predictions of future trends. Some designers conduct their own research, while others rely on trend reports published by fashion industry trade groups. Trend reports indicate what styles, colors, and fabrics will be popular for a particular season in the future. Textile manufacturers use these trend reports to begin designing fabrics and patterns while fashion designers begin to sketch preliminary designs. Designers will then visit manufacturers or trade shows to procure samples of fabrics and decide which fabrics to use with which designs.

Once designs and fabrics are chosen, a prototype of the article using cheaper materials is created and then worn by a model to see what adjustments to the design need to be made. During this time, designers usually will narrow down their choices of which designs to offer for sale. After the final adjustments and selections have been made, samples of the article using the actual materials are sewn, and then marketed to clothing retailers. Many designs are shown at fashion and trade shows a few times a year. Retailers will then place orders for certain items, which are then manufactured and distributed to stores.

Computer-aided design (CAD) is increasingly being used in the fashion design industry. While most designers initially sketch designs by hand, a growing number also translate these hand sketches to the computer. CAD allows designers to view designs of clothing on virtual models and in various colors and shapes, thus saving time by requiring fewer adjustments of prototypes and samples later.

Depending on the size of the design firm and level of experience, fashion designers may have varying levels of involvement in different aspects of design and production. In large design firms, fashion designers often are the lead designers who are responsible for creating the designs, choosing the colors and fabrics, and overseeing technical designers who turn the designs into a final product. They are responsible for creating the prototypes and patterns and work with the manufacturers and suppliers during the production stages. Large design houses also employ their own patternmakers, tailors, and sewers who create the master patterns for the design and sew the prototypes and samples. Designers working in small firms, or those new to the job, usually perform most of the technical, patternmaking, and sewing tasks in addition to designing the clothing. (The work of pattern makers, hand sewers, and tailors is covered in the statement on textile, apparel, and furnishings occupations elsewhere in the *Handbook*).

Fashion designers working for apparel wholesalers or manufacturers create designs for the mass market. These designs are manufactured in various sizes and colors. A small number of high-fashion (haute couture) designers are self-employed and create custom designs for individual clients, usually at very high prices. Other high-fashion designers sell their designs in their own retail stores or cater to specialty stores or high-fashion department stores. These designers create a mixture of original garments and those that follow established fashion trends.

Some fashion designers specialize in costume design for performing arts, motion picture, and television productions. The work of costume designers is similar to other fashion designers. Costume designers perform extensive research into the styles worn during the period in which the performance takes place, or work with directors to select appropriate attire for performances. They make sketches of designs, select fabric and other materials, and oversee the production of the costumes. They also must stay within the costume budget for the particular production.

## Working Conditions

Fashion designers employed by manufacturing establishments, wholesalers, or design firms generally work regular hours in well-lighted and comfortable settings. Designers who freelance generally work on a contract, or job, basis. They frequently adjust their workday to suit their clients' schedules and deadlines, meeting with the clients during evening or weekend hours when necessary. Freelance designers tend to work longer hours and in smaller, more congested, environments, and are under pressure to please clients and to find new ones in order to maintain a steady income. Regardless of their work setting, all fashion designers occasionally work long hours to meet production deadlines or prepare for fashion shows.

The global nature of the fashion business requires constant communication with suppliers, manufacturers, and customers all over the United States and the world. Most fashion designers travel several times a year to trade and fashion shows in order to learn about the latest fashion trends. Designers also may travel frequently to meet with fabric and materials suppliers and with manufacturers who produce the final apparel products.

### Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

In fashion design, employers seek individuals with a 2-year or 4-year degree who are knowledgeable about textiles, fabrics, ornamentation, and fashion trends. Designers must have a strong sense of the esthetic—an eye for color and detail, a sense of balance and proportion, and an appreciation for beauty. Fashion designers also need excellent communication and problem-solving skills. Despite the advancement of computer-aided design, sketching ability remains an important advantage in fashion design. A good portfolio—a collection of examples of a person's best work—often is the deciding factor in getting a job.

Bachelor's of fine arts and associate degree programs in fashion design are offered at many colleges, universities, and private art and design schools. Some fashion designers also combine a fashion design degree with a business, marketing, or fashion merchandising degree, especially those who want to run their own business or retail store. Basic coursework includes color, textiles, sewing and tailoring, pattern making, fashion history, CAD, and design of different types of clothing such as menswear or footwear. Coursework in human anatomy, mathematics, and psychology also is useful.

The National Association of Schools of Art and Design accredits approximately 250 postsecondary institutions with programs in art and design. Most of these schools award degrees in fashion design. Many schools do not allow formal entry into a program until a student has successfully completed basic art and design courses. Applicants usually have to submit sketches and other examples of their artistic ability.

In addition to creativity and sketching ability, fashion designers also need to have sewing and patternmaking skills, even if they do not perform these tasks themselves. Designers need to be able to understand these skills so they can give proper instructions as to how the garment should be constructed. Fashion designers also need strong sales and presentation skills in order to persuade clients to purchase their designs. Good teamwork and communication skills also are necessary because of the increasingly international nature of the business that requires constant contact with suppliers, manufacturers, and buyers around the world.

Aspiring fashion designers can learn these necessary skills through internships with design or manufacturing firms. Some designers also gain valuable experience working in retail stores, as personal stylists, or as custom tailors. Such experience can help designers gain sales and marketing skills while learning what styles and fabrics look good on different people. Designers also can gain exposure to potential employers by entering their designs in student or amateur contests. Because of the global nature of the fashion industry, experience in one of the international fashion centers, such as Milan or Paris, can be useful.

Beginning fashion designers usually start out as pattern makers or sketching assistants for more experienced designers before they can advance to higher level positions. Experienced designers may advance to chief designer, design department head, or other supervisory position. Some designers may start their own design company, or sell their designs in their own retail stores. A few of the most successful designers can work for high-fashion design houses that offer personalized design services to wealthy clients.

### Employment

Fashion designers held about 17,000 jobs in 2004. More than 1 out of 4 were self-employed. About 25 percent of fashion designers worked for apparel and piece goods merchant wholesalers. Another 15 percent worked in cut and sew apparel manufacturing. The remainder worked for corporate offices involved in the management of companies and enterprises, clothing stores, performing arts companies, specialized design services firms, textile and textile product mills, and footwear and accessories manufacturers.

Employment of fashion designers tends to be concentrated in regional fashion centers. In 2004, two-thirds of salaried fashion designers were employed in either New York or California.

### Job Outlook

Job competition is expected be keen as many designers are attracted to the creativity and glamour associated with the occupation, while relatively few job openings arise because of low job turnover and a small number of new openings created every year. Employment of fashion designers is projected to grow more slowly than the average for all occupations through 2014. Employment declines in cut and sew apparel manufacturing are projected to offset increases in apparel wholesalers.

Employment growth for fashion designers will stem from a growing population demanding more clothing, footwear, and accessories. Demand is increasing for stylish clothing that is affordable, especially among middle income consumers. The best job opportunities will be in design firms that design mass market clothing sold in department stores and retail chain stores, such as apparel wholesale firms. Few employment opportunities are expected in design firms that cater to high-end department stores and specialty boutiques as demand for expensive, high-fashion design declines relative to other luxury goods and services.

Job opportunities in cut and sew manufacturing will continue to decline as apparel is increasingly manufactured overseas. However, employment of fashion designers in this industry will not decline as fast as other occupations because firms are more likely to keep design work in-house.

### Earnings

Median annual earnings for fashion designers were $55,840 in May 2004. The middle 50 percent earned between $38,800 and $77,580. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $27,970, and the highest 10 percent earned more than $112,840.

Earnings in fashion design can vary widely based on the employer and years of experience. Starting salaries in fashion design tend to be very low until designers are established in the industry. Salaried fashion designers usually earn higher and more stable incomes than self-employed or freelance designers. However, a few of the most successful self-employed fashion designers may earn many times the salary of the highest paid salaried designers. Self-employed fashion designers must provide their own benefits and retirement.

### Related Occupations

Workers in other art and design occupations include artists and related workers, commercial and industrial designers, floral designers, graphic designers, and interior designers. Jewelers and precious stone and metal workers also design wearable accessories. Other common occupations in the fashion industry include demonstrators, product promoters, and models; photographers; purchasing managers, buyers, and purchasing agents; retail salespersons; and textile, apparel, and furnishings occupations.

**Sources of Additional Information**

For general information about art and design and a list of accredited college-level programs, contact:

➤ National Association of Schools of Art and Design, 11250 Roger Bacon Dr., Suite 21, Reston, VA 20190-5248.  Internet: **http://nasad.arts-accredit.org**

For general information about careers in fashion design, contact:

➤ Fashion Group International, 8 West 40th St., 7th Floor, New York, NY 10018.  Internet: **http://www.fgi.org**